

Opportunity Walks: School District Policy Puts Prevention to Work

Issue

The Mount Vernon School District wanted to encourage students to walk to school as recommended by the Healthy Communities program at Skagit County Public Health Department. Yet, what could be done, when they were already facing serious budget cuts and many of their schools are in areas with busy roads and hazardous crosswalks?

Need met opportunity. The district needed to cut the cost of school buses, and Superintendent Dr. Carl Bruner saw an opportunity to create a comprehensive policy approach to transportation. With the help of the local health department, the district board received grant support through “Communities Putting Prevention to Work” (CPPW). CPPW provides federal stimulus dollars for towns and cities to make changes that encourage healthy eating, more physical activity, and reduced tobacco use. Projects that receive funding focus on policies and neighborhood changes that are shown to be effective in reducing obesity and smoking.

Interventions

Working closely with the Skagit County Public Health Department, the Mount Vernon District developed a policy approach to encourage physical activity, improve safety, and save money. In 2011, principals, teachers, and parents supported the district plan to change the morning “bell time” schedule so that schools start sequentially. This allows a reduction in the size of the district’s bus fleet from 27 to 12, and reduces traffic congestion near schools. The district also hosted “Walk and Bike to School Day” events, including a bicycle safety rodeo. Centennial and Little Mountain schools were pilot sites for these events.

In 2012, the district will implement a student transportation policy. A one-mile walk zone around each school will further reduce bus costs and encourage more physical activity. A local church has volunteered to be a “drop and walk” site where parents can drop off and pick up their kids. This helps reduce congestion near schools. Walking monitors will make sure the children get to and from school safely. The district received additional grant funding from the state Department of Transportation for “Safe Routes to School.” It will help them assess problem areas, provide crossing guards, and expand walking and biking promotion.

Impact

The district estimates it will save \$260,000 per year with their bell time policy, not counting fuel and bus maintenance savings. The one-mile walk zone is anticipated to get 600 children walking to school and save another \$260,000 in busing costs.

During the Walk to School Day events in 2011, Centennial had 77 percent of their 604 students participate. One of the classrooms had 100 percent participation and three others had 90 percent or more. Little Mountain had 41 percent of their 676 students walk or bike to school.

In 2010, Superintendent Bruner told the health department “It’s time to take things to the next level.” The result has been the school district’s integrated policy approach. These sustainable activities are motivating hundreds of children to be more physically active. CPPW funding for prevention is making a lasting impact in Mount Vernon.

Skagit County population: 116,901

Mount Vernon population: 31,743

Skagit County Public Health Department

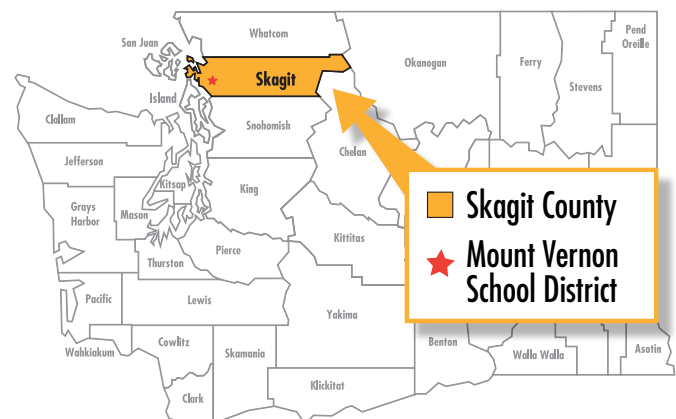
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